

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL PATRICK J. MALAY,
COMMANDING OFFICER, REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM FIVE, MULTINATIONAL FORCE-WEST, VIA
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Okay, I
believe we're ready. And, Colonel, Colonel Patrick J. Malay, who is the
commanding officer of the region -- or Regimental Combat Team 5 at MNF-W, thank
you for joining us for the Bloggers Roundtable today, sir.

And do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. MALAY: Yes, I do, Jack.

Good morning from al Asad in Western Al Anbar province.

As Jack mentioned, I'm Colonel Pat Malay, the commanding officer of
Regimental Combat Team 5. Yesterday, I briefed the Pentagon press corps, and I
believe it's equally important to speak to you as well today. Thank you for
affording us the opportunity to discuss the accomplishments of America's men and
women -- (audio interference) -- region of Iraq. Regimental Combat Team 5 in
the western Al Anbar embedded reconstruction team, the EPRT, are partnered to
execute counterinsurgency operations by leveraging the elements of national
power and synchronizing our efforts with the Iraqi security forces to assist
western Al Anbar achieve self-reliance.

RCT-5 has been on the ground for approximately three months. The
sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marines have quickly wrapped their arms around the
multitude of challenges the environment here presents on a daily basis. Along
with the Iraqi security forces, we're working diligently to assist the
development and functionality of local government. This is to create, maintain
and continue to improve the capacity of industrial complex; repair and maintain
critical infrastructure; and aid the Iraqis to improve their daily standard of
living.

In an area of operations the size of South Carolina, which is about
30,000 square miles, that stretches from western Ramadi to the Syrian, Jordanian
and Saudi borders, it contains roughly 700,000 people. And this is no easy
task. We remain vigilant, and continue to operate in unison with the Iraqi
police and Iraqi army in order to maintain security in western Anbar. We
deliberately hunt insurgents who aim to disrupt Iraq's path to self sufficiency.

We've enjoyed successes in our targeting efforts, and have enabled us
to fix, find and destroy the insurgent teams bent on delivering violence upon

the people of Al Anbar. In today's environment we must fill the fluid -- we must be fluid-like like the insurgents, but we need to double our patience.

We are proud to say, though, that the Iraqis are taking the lead in multiple sectors in our area of operations in cities like Hit, Haditha, and al-Qaim, the Iraqi security forces habitually launch independent operations that yield encouraging results.

The insurgents by and large have been marginalized, and must seek refuge in the wadis and in the desert where we relentlessly pursue them. The RCTP-5 staff which, in a conventional setup, would limit their focus to traditional warfighting functions, and they would devote most of their time to coordinating into various lines of operation; transition; security, governance, economics, rule of law, essential services and communications. These are what we consider the lines of operations, and this is primarily how we're executing the counterinsurgency here.

We are no longer concerned solely with kills and captures. The staff monitor the increased autonomy of the Iraqi security forces; the newfound prominence of the local government; and the microfinance in oil refinery enterprises are starting to take off; and there's the appearance of functioning courts in six major population centers; and there is also a renaissance and a renewed mobility of the local media. This battle has significantly evolved since I was here last, but then again, so have we. Likewise, the insurgents are on the run. Our battalions have been able to dedicate more time to humanitarian operations.

I'm sure you heard about the 2-year-old Haditha girl named Mena (sp) who was discovered by Marines on patrol and transported to Vanderbilt University in Nashville where she underwent open heart surgery to correct a congenital heart condition that would have ultimately proved fatal. In Amarah a 5-year-old boy who was the son of one of our Iraqi police has a similar condition, and he's been recently flown to South Carolina. If we were engaged in the daily firefights that were common here two years ago, none of this would be possible.

I'd like to leave more time for your questions, so I'll close with this. The synergy between RCT-5 and the western Anbar EPRT continues to expand on the success of our predecessors. These efforts, though great, would be fruitless if not for the dedication, bravery and commitment of the Iraqi people and their homegrown security forces. It goes without saying that the Marines, sailors, soldiers and airmen in RCT-5 continue to honor the tradition of the American service. And if you'd like to check me at my word, you can catch a plane out here anytime, embed with us. You're always welcome.

Okay.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) All right, sir, thank you very much.

David, why don't you get us started?

Q Hi, this is David Axe with War is Boring. Colonel, could you speak some about the local Sons of Iraq groups, and what their strength is and how they've performed lately, and what you think their future is?

COL. MALAY: Yeah, David, that's interesting that you asked that question, because that -- the Sons of Iraq are found only in the Ramadi-Fallujah areas. We're way beyond Sons of Iraq. Presently, we have 5,000 Iraqi

policemen, 1,000 highway patrolmen and 7,000 Iraqi army soldiers that are completely integrated in our daily operations here. We don't have Sons of Iraq.

Q Because you don't need them?

COL. MALAY: No, we're doing fine. We're looking forward to hiring some more Iraqi police, and we're expanding the 7th Iraqi Army division to cover down in some areas in Rupa and Nukeib. So we are constantly in an effort to thicken the Iraqi security forces, but we don't need the Sons of Iraq which originally started as I believe concerned local citizens. Q Right.

COL. MALAY: We're well beyond that.

Q So you find that the Iraqi police are performing that day- to-day sort of static security role adequately?

COL. MALAY: Yes, David, they are doing the static role adequately, and they are doing some mobile work as well with the provincial security forces. We just had the provincial chief of police, Major General Tarik here, and we plan to take some -- Sabatine and provisional security force platoons and move them to help beef up the areas on the fringes, for instance, in Rupa which is the gateway to the Syrian and Jordanian borders east of -- west of here.

Q How do you account for the -- how do you account for -- sorry, I'm getting feedback -- how do you account for the improved performance of your local Iraqi police versus the poor performance we've seen from the police elsewhere in Iraq?

COL. MALAY: Well, I don't know about the performance of the police elsewhere as a means of measure. But I can talk to you about the police that we have here. They are very much a homegrown security force. They operate in and around the areas that they grew up in. They were the recipients of the brutal murderous conduct of the terrorists that were here, and they have risen up against them, which puts them in a position where it is an absolutely life-and-death struggle between them and the insurgents. There's no quarter between these guys anymore.

Now they're having good luck with reconciliation with some of those who were not the hardcore al Qaeda-type insurgents. So my point is, they're hard pressed to hunt down and kill or capture the insurgents, but they're also starting to integrate the Sunni in general back into their daily functioning aspect of a civil society.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Bruce. COL. MALAY: You're welcome.

Q Hi, Colonel, Bruce McQuain with QandO.net. You mentioned your -- your AO has the border areas of Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. My question has to do with, A, how much of that is the ISF handling; and B, what type of flow -- foreign fighter flow -- are you seeing now versus what was seen maybe six, eight months ago.

COL. MALAY: Okay, Bruce. Well, you know as a former soldier that it's all about the troop-to-task ratio. And we have significantly reduced our

forces here; actually we've taken a 40 percent cut in combat power that we're absorbing in the last 90 days, so we are almost completely using Iraqi security forces on the border.

Actually, the border regions don't fall completely under my purview, but I work closely with the Marines that assist the Desert Wolves who protect the border as well as the border entry control teams.

To answer your question about the foreign fighters, you know, when I was here in 2004, I served in Fallujah as a battalion commander, and those guys were coming down the western Euphrates River valley literally by the busload, full of weapons systems, chest rigs, you know, a functioning fighting force.

That is all over with now. We've killed and captured some foreign fighters, and when we interrogate those that have survived the engagement, they make it very clear that they get to the border. they hide, they sneak across the berm, they get scooped up in a pickup truck, and they are hustled across the desert to a tent somewhere where they hang out for months and months on end, many of them becoming dejected and trying to get out of the country.

The foreign fighter flow has really dried up, but they are still out there.

MR. HOLT: Thanks, all right.

COL. MALAY: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Farouk.

Q Hi, sir, Farouk Ahmed from the Institute for the Study of War.

I'm wondering if you could go a little bit into the enemy system exactly. I believe there's a small element in Rupa, but if you could describe more -- you know, who the enemy is exactly? How does one cell communicate to another, if they do at all? And what are their operational capabilities at this point?

COL. MALAY: Yeah, Farouk, I'd be happy to comment on that. They are your classic insurgent cell network. They are finding it more and more difficult to operate in the populated areas. They're being pushed into the desert wadis. And what we've seen with the insurgents that we have come in contact with, usually there's an Iraqi facilitator with some foreign fighters. And the Iraqi facilitator is -- has consistently been a man of criminal nature. They're -- they're thugs and criminals. They operate outside of the fringes of mainstream society. And they're the ones that seem to be facilitating and cooperating with these foreign networks to bring fighters in.

And when I say foreign networks, we see guys coming in from Yemen, Algeria, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Again, these are very often middle aged -- young-to middle-aged males who are kind of malcontents and misfits from their society. They get targeted by these recruiters. They're fed a very steep line of propaganda which causes them to think that they're coming here to fight in a jihad. And then when they get here they find out that that's not the case. And some of them volunteer to be suicide bombers. Most of the ones that we've run into were trying to get out of this tangled web they've found themselves in.

Q Sir, could you go into, as far as enemy capabilities, are you running across, like IED networks? VBIED networks? Are you coming across, like, more, you know, gunfight-type activities? What exactly are they able to do?

COL. MALAY: Yeah. Well, Farouk, we do have the IED networks. They're becoming less and less effective. They're resorting to victim-activated devices -- device -- the remote controlled devices just because of the effort that we've put into the counter-IED movement.

Those guys, they try to be very slick. They sneak out, they toss an IED in place, or they'll have one that they've put in place, and they'll try to get the detonator attached to it when they see a patrol coming, or they think the patrol needs to come back through that area.

They have been blowing themselves up in that effort with an increased regularity, much to our relief. And the guys that we're running into in the wadis, they're pretty well armed: PKs, RPGs, we found some with some G-3s, which is an Iranian knock-off of the FN, and they've got grenades. They're very often wearing suicide vests. They're using GPS', but they are living a very nomadic existence out in the wadis.

Q Okay, that's very interesting. Thank you very much, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. MALAY: You're welcome, Farouk.

MR. HOLT: And Richard. Q Good evening, Colonel. This is Richard Lowry.

COL. MALAY: Okay, Richard, how are you doing? How's your book coming along?

Q Going well, just chugging along.

How are the MRAPs holding up?

COL. MALAY: They're holding up very well. We're driving them all over the place.

We're putting, you know, thousands of miles on them. They're a big heavy machine, and we're having some problems, like a couple of strut- type issues. But the manufacturer sent us a bunch of parts out and improved the system. And we're bringing them in, slapping the parts in and keeping them on the road.

They're not really good for off-road mobility, but for what we're using them for they're tremendous. They really are mine-resistant.

Q So they're saving lives?

COL. MALAY: Absolutely, unequivocally.

Q That's good to hear.

One other question: There's been a recent spike in violence throughout Iraq in the last two or three weeks. Have you had any indication of that in your western AO?

COL. MALAY: No, Richard, we haven't seen it. We have an incident rate of about 15 a week, so about 60 per month. And what's important to point out about that statistic is we consider any IED find an attempted attack, so it goes into that statistic. But what we're finding more and more now is that the IED finds are tips; the civilians are walking out to us saying, hey, you might want to look here. Or the RPs, Iraqi police and army, are going out there and digging these things up.

And what is also significant is that we are finding increased numbers of caches, and we are realizing now based on what the enemy is in the market for is that we are tearing the guts out of their operational base in Al Anbar. They are not able to fall on caches, and find those ordinance and munitions that allowed them to readily make IEDs. So they are starting to turn to home-made explosives which are easier for us to find, harder for them to create an IED with. And they are finding it increasingly frustrating to the point that some of them are just leaving the area.

Q Well, thank you. Keep up the good work.

COL. MALAY: You're welcome, Richard. MR. HOLT: All right. Hey, Andrew.

Q Sir, good morning or good afternoon to you. Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer. Good to talk to you again, sir.

COL. MALAY: Good to talk to you, Andrew. I think I met you out here before, right?

Q Yes, sir, about a month and a half ago, I was -- spent a couple of days in Ali Saden (ph). You did -- you're doing too well, sir. There's nothing good -- nothing to report on, nothing but good news. It's kind of nice being out there.

COL. MALAY: Yeah, your son was a cannon cocker, right?

Q Still is, sir. He re-upped this summer.

COL. MALAY: Thank you for your son's service.

Q Thank you, appreciate it.

Sir, two questions. I listened to the press conference yesterday. Are you sending some of the Marines home early? Or are you just waiting for the seven months to finish up?

COL. MALAY: No, we are sending them home as scheduled. The questions that revolved around the one-year tour, this that and the other thing, we are still sticking to the seven-month tour for Marine infantry battalions. The regimental headquarters and above are going to a 13-month tour, so that we can lend that consistency to the command and control effort, and just as importantly, that we can continue to nurture those habitual relationships with the Arab leaders, the Iraqi leaders that we are dealing with here.

Q Well, good, then my follow up is perfect them. Could you talk to us a bit about the PRT projects, which are really about the long term, and going to keep things going. Is the cement factory operational? Is the fertilizer factory in -- (inaudible) -- running? Can you talk to us a bit about their operations?

COL. MALAY: Yeah, Andrew, the big -- the big infrastructure effort that the EPRT is concentrating on is the K3 oil refinery and the Haditha dam. As you know, the Haditha dam and the Tahaddi (ph) power plan, once we get those up and running -- actually the Haditha dam is up and running, we are improving its capacity to put out electricity, and the Tahaddin (ph) power plant is moving well down the road; significant effort that that is.

But when they're done, that'll provide 30 percent of the electrical power grid for the entire country. So we are working hard at that. It's a combined interwoven network in that once you get the oil, the crude flowing out of -- (inaudible) -- down to K3, we'll start to turn a finished product, which in turn will turn on the generators in the western Euphrates River valley, which is primarily what they have set up to run their electrical grid; and then they'll take the electricity out of the Haditha dam and push that towards the Ramadi-Fallujah-Baghdad corridor.

The cement plant and the phosphate plant, they are primarily run with the electrical power grid. And like I said, once we start turning on those generators, we'll be able to redirect that towards them.

They are running in such a manner that they can keep the facilities up and functioning, but they are not near the capacity that they can be. But we are working on it.

Q Okay, thank you.

COL. MALAY: Welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay, I had a couple of other folks that dialed in.

Q Jack, it's Christian.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Christian, yeah, go ahead.

Q Colonel Malay, it's Christian Lowe with military dot com.

I have a question for you. You may have addressed this yesterday, but what are you hearing about the turnover date, Anbar, to the Iraqi -- (inaudible).

COL. MALAY: Christian, are you referring to the provisional Iraqi control -- (inaudible)?

Q Basically turning over security just like in other provinces in Iraq to the Iraqi security forces rather than under U.S.

COL. MALAY: Oh, okay, I understand now. Yeah, we're well down the road to doing that. The Iraqi security forces are in the lead across this region.

Quite frankly they're -- the -- they're -- we're in a supporting role to them. The joint patrols that we do are becoming less and less us with them, but them going out on their own. And of course this is all pushing toward PIC, Provincial Iraqi Control. And in a discussion with Governor Mahmoud (ph) at a provisional council meeting, they asked him, hey, what do you envision with PIC? And he said, I don't see anything different; just continue on the path that we're going. Which is going exceptionally well putting the Iraqis further and further in front.

Q But do you have a date? I heard something about June. COL. MALAY: You know I don't know. I guess -- yeah, I heard that June was kicked around. That's kind of a higher headquarters issue. But the point is, it really doesn't make a lot of difference to us, because we are doing this already. It's going to be kind of a blip on the screen. We are well down the road to Iraqi control.

Q And if I could slide one little specific question in here, it was very controversial the last time I was there, but I wanted to know what your feelings are, and if you -- if you are beginning the change of policy for personal -- (inaudible).

COL. MALAY: You broke up there right at the end. PPE, personal protective equipment, PPE?

Q Check. The last time I was there they were talking about you know giving the commanders the option for -- (inaudible) -- lower level commanders the option to -- (inaudible).

COL. MALAY: Yeah, okay, we have -- I have that ability to do that now. I sign waivers all the time for operations that we allow reduced PPE. When we are driving in the vehicles we still keep the gear on; but when we are walking around, especially in the heat, it just makes sense to husband our manpower and our energy and keep guys on the patrol a little longer.

Q And what specifically do you let them take off?

COL. MALAY: It depends entirely on the mission. For instance if there are snipers out there, and they need to get behind a sniper rifle, we let them take off the helmet. We let them take out some of the SAPI plates so they can get down in a good -- a good prone position.

And that's just about it right now. And it's -- and it's being closely considered more and more by our higher headquarters, just because of the reduced threat out here, and the reduced number of attacks.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, was there anybody else?

Q Yeah, Griff Jenkins with Fox News.

MR. HOLT: Griff, go ahead.

Q Hi Colonel, and let me preface by saying, I hope I can get out there and see you. Give Lieutenant King a missive, and if Fox'll ever let me loose, I'll come and see you and see what you're doing out there. COL. MALAY:

We're looking forward to you. We've got ice cold water in the fridge, and hot coffee if that's what you need too.

Q Perfect. Let me ask you a little larger question. Obviously in the news you are aware that two bombs ripped through Baqubah and Ramadi, killed upwards of 50 people. And I realize you are a little northwest of that. But if I could ask, there are some folks out there who will say, gee, this proves it's really not stable. The successes Colonel Malay talks about are always subject to just go out the window at any moment. This proves it, and it's not worth being there anymore.

How would you respond to something like that?

COL. MALAY: Well, if you were here you saw the progress that we're making, the development of the civil society, and how we're -- we're helping the Iraqi people in my area of operations enter into the 21st century to get out of the tyranny that is placed on top their heads. You would look at these attacks and say, you know, that this is a counterinsurgency. It's not a sprint; it's not a marathon; it's an endurance race. And the enemy here is -- they're very committed. They hate the idea of a free and democratic Iraq. And they are still out there trying to attack. But it's getting harder and harder for them.

You know when you take a look at the number of violent acts, the incidents here, like I said, they're down to 15 a week; 60 per month. We have about 700,000 people here. If you compare it to Los Angeles, which has I think about 2-1/2 million, they have 2,017 violent incidents a month.

Q Great, and if I could just follow up, if you -- is there -- do we know who carried this attack out that's on the wires? Or do we know anything about it? Or could you comment on it?

COL. MALAY: No, I don't know about it yet. I'm just hearing about it, and I'm sure that we've got some experts down there that are pulling the string back. And what I'd like to point out is that you guys hear about the attack. What you don't hear about is how the Iraqi security forces and the investigators go out on the crime scene, they start to put the pieces of the puzzle together, they pull the string back, and they relentlessly pursue those guys that are responsible, and we tear the guts out of another insurgent IED cell.

Q They're successes?

COL. MALAY: They're very successful.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. MALAY: You're welcome. MR. HOLT: All right, got just a few more minutes there, left here. Any follow up questions?

Q Yes, I have one, Jack. Bruce McQuain again, Colonel.

You talked about the ISF, 7th Division, and obviously they are doing a lot of work in an extended area. I would assume that that means that their sustainment capability is quite improved from the last time I heard about it. Is that the case?

COL. MALAY: Yeah, absolutely Bruce. The military transition teams that we've had embedded at the battalion, brigade and division levels have gone to some effort to help the Iraqis develop their ability to sustain themselves. And quite frankly, a lot of it hinged around fuel. And as we start to develop the ability for Al Anbar to refine its own fuel, we expect their abilities to continue to increase exponentially.

They are much, much better than they were, and they are getting better every day. I don't help them out with their operations anymore.

MR. HOLT: Excellent, thanks.

Okay, and someone else?

Q Yes, this is Richard Lowry again.

Colonel, you said to me that when you were in Diwaniyah in 2003, you had an epiphany and you thought to yourself we'd not seen the end of this yet. How do you feel about that today? Do you see that we're getting closer to a conclusion to this effort in Iraq?

COL. MALAY: You know, Richard, the idea of clear/hold/build to fight a counterinsurgency, when I was in Diwaniyah after the celebratory fire from Uday and Qusay's death and the brewing problem that we saw with the disbanding of the army and the de-Ba'athification, I felt like that, no, we hadn't cleared and we were going to have to do it. When I went to Fallujah the second time, we certainly got engaged in the clearing, detailed clearing. And now what I see is ---

MR. : Guys, I hate to cut you off. This is Brian (sp) in Atlanta. Your time is up and there's another unit waiting for another interview at the bottom of the hour as of right now, and we're going to have to stop this.

Q Okay.

COL. MALAY: Hey, thanks for your time, guys. Come on out and I'll talk with you some more. MR. HOLT: Thank you.

Q Thanks very much, Colonel.

Q Thank you.

COL. MALAY: Thank you.

END.